



Nurse Practitioner (NP) vs. Physician's Assistant (PA)

If you are considering an advanced degree in healthcare, you may want to know the difference between the nurse practitioner and the physician assistant occupations. The truth is these two careers are similar in some ways as well as different in others. Most importantly, they both provide career alternatives to professionals who want to work in advanced healthcare but do not want to make the commitment that is needed to become a physician.

On a very basic level, it is important to know that a nurse practitioner (NP) attends a nursing school while a physician assistant (PA) attends a medical school or center of medicine. Because of this, the philosophies that graduates come out of school with are slightly different. Nurses follow a patient-centered model, in which they focus on disease prevention and health education as well as handle assessment, diagnosis and treatment. Physician assistants follow a disease-centered model, in which they focus on the biologic and pathologic components of health as well as are involved in assessment, diagnosis and treatment. Another difference to consider when looking at a nurse practitioner vs physician's assistant career is the areas of specialization that are available. NPs can work in many different and diverse areas, such as geriatrics, mental health, pediatrics and women's health. PAs have more of a generalized education, but can also specialize in areas that may include emergency medicine, orthopedics and general surgery. When thinking about the physician assistant vs nurse practitioner careers, keep in mind the different health care philosophies, educational options and specialty areas available to determine what best might fit for you.

Side-by-Side Comparison

There are many points to consider when looking at these two occupations. Below is a side-by-side comparison detailing more about nurse practitioner and physician assistant job preparation and training, on-the-job frameworks, and pay and career outlook. It's important to have a robust understanding of a career before beginning any educational program. While reading, do keep in mind that both NPs and PAs will play important roles in health care in the future. This is because the U.S. could see a shortage of [90,000 physicians](#) by 2022 and 130,000 physicians by 2025, reports the American Association of Medical Colleges. Because of this, both NPs and PAs will be needed to step in and help fill vital health care roles.

	Nurse Practitioner	Physician Assistant
Number practicing in the U.S.	110,200 as of 2012, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).	86,700 as of 2012, according to the BLS .
Pay	The mean annual wage, as of May 2013, was \$95,070, or \$45.71 per hour for NPs, according to the BLS .	Annual mean wages for PAs, as of 2013, were \$94,350, or \$45.36 per hour, the BLS reports.
Expected job growth	34 percent from 2012 to 2022, much faster than average for all occupations, according to the BLS.	38 percent from 2012 to 2022, much faster than average.

	Nurse Practitioner	Physician Assistant
Anticipated number of new positions available by 2022	37,100	33,300
Meeting the Requirements		
Degree requirements	Currently, NPs need a minimum of a master's degree from an accredited school to become licensed within a state. Even though the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) has recommended that the new NP standard be the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) by 2015 , states still just require a master's or graduate degree.	PA's need a minimum of a master's degree from an accredited medical school or center of medicine to seek licensure.
Degrees available	A NP can seek a master's or DNP from a nursing school, although the DNP is suggested by the AACN. In the U.S., there are 92 DNP programs available for nurse practitioners.	170 physician assistant programs, most of which were master's degrees, were available in 2012, according to the BLS .
Program details	NPs typically choose a specialty area and need to complete 500 didactic hours and between 500 to 700 clinical hours.	PAs are trained as generalists and typically need to complete about 1,000 didactic hours and more than 2,000 clinical hours.
School accreditation	NP programs typically will be accredited through the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) or the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing, Inc. (ACEN). Click here to search for CCNE accredited schools. Students can search for accredited master's degrees and DNP programs through the AACN web page that can be found here .	PA programs are accredited through the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant, Inc. (ARC-PA). A list of PA programs is made available through the Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA) and can be found here .
Certification and Licensing		

	Nurse Practitioner	Physician Assistant
Certification	NPs can seek national certification in their specialty area through the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) or the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners .	PAs need to pass the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination (PANCE) available through the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA).
Licensing	A RN license, a master's or graduate degree and national certification are generally needed to seek state licensure.	A master's degree from an accredited school and national certification are generally needed to seek state licensure.
Licensing Agency	NPs seek licensure through a state board of nursing or board of medical examiners. The AACN provides links to the licensing agencies with information available here .	PA seeks licensure through a state medical board, board of medical examiners or similar. A list of state licensing agencies available through the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA) can be found here .
Re-certification	NPs must be re-certified every five years . They may sit for the appropriate exam or complete a minimum 1,000 hours of clinical practice and 75 to 150 continuing education units in their NP specialty.	PAs need 100 hours of continuing medical education (CME) hours every two years and an exam every six years .
Details about the Job		
Practice Framework	NPs generally work with physician oversight. However, currently 250 practices in the U.S. are operated solely by NPs, and legislation is being pushed to expand the number of states that allow NPs to work autonomously from 16 to 30, according to The Washington Post .	PA cannot work independently of physicians.
Average number of prescriptions written per week	46.58 in 2013, according to a survey done by Advance Healthcare Network	49.76 in 2013

	Nurse Practitioner	Physician Assistant
Average number of patients seen per week	56.28 in 2013, per the Advance study	61.11 in 2013
Average number of years in practice	8.9 years, per Advance Healthcare Network	11.97 in 2013

REFERENCES

Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2014-15 Edition*, Nurse Anesthetists, Nurse Midwives, and Nurse Practitioners, on the Internet at <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/nurse-anesthetists-nurse-midwives-and-nurse-practitioners.htm> (visited September 9, 2015).

Internet: "Nurse Practitioner Schools – Frequently Asked Questions" <http://www.nursepractitionerschools.com/faq/np-vs-physician-assistant> (visited September 9, 2015)

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Nurse Practitioner vs. Physician Assistant

Nurse practitioners (NPs) work in a variety of settings. So do physician assistants (PAs). They can both be found in hospitals and clinics, from rural to urban practices. PAs care for a variety of conditions. So do NPs. They both treat illnesses, provide patient teaching and prescribe medications, often acting as the primary care provider.

But there is a difference.

"When the patient asks me what the difference is between a PA and an NP, the difference is really in our training and our background," said Physician Assistant Patrick Killeen, president of the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA). "Both are important members of the health care team. To the patient, it may or may not matter, but to the provider, it may make a difference as to how that medical knowledge has been obtained."

PAs follow a medical type of model for training. Most PAs have a master's degree. They attend programs that focus on the medical aspects of health care, training them to be general practitioners, though PAs can specialize in everything from primary care to pediatrics and general surgical care. Nine to 15 months of the program is spent in supervised clinical training, according to the Physician Assistant Education Association and the AAPA.

Similarly, NPs also hold advanced degrees - either master's or doctorate degrees.

Nurse practitioners have, on average, over 10 years of nursing experience before they go into their practitionership," said Nurse Practitioner Mary Jo Goolsby, director of research and education at the American

Academy of Nurse Practitioners (AANP). "We're a little bit different from some clinicians who come in right out of school."

NPs must hold previous nursing degrees to qualify for the graduate programs as well as professional nursing experience prior to entering school. Students are taught by other NPs, according to the AANP. Like PAs, NPs can practice in a variety of specialty areas.

In the end, both NPs and PAs are licensed and accredited by exam.

NPs and PAs practice in all 50 states and Washington, D.C., though practice is regulated state-to-state. Both professions also have prescriptive rights in all 50 states, with some limitations varying from state to state.

"While some states have no requirements for an NP to have a collaborative relationship with a physician or other providers, so that they are more 'independent,' other states do have requirements for some level of collaborative agreement to be in place," Goolsby said.

For PAs, a physician is the head of the practice, Killeen said, but there is still a great deal of autonomy. He described a PA in rural Wyoming who practices under a physician available by phone and by Internet, but he is the primary care provider for his patients.

"And that's our goal, that within accordance with state laws, PAs are able to practice within the full extent of their license," he said.

Goolsby said there is one thing that remains constant between NPs and PAs: "At the end of the day, if a person is being treated for any condition, the standard of care should be the same."

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